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ABSTRACT

Elements of a treatment program, Comprehensive Vocationally Oriented Psychotherapy, are presented in terms of youth contact efforts, job opportunities, community outreach, individualized teaching, program administration and job matching activities. An initial program evaluation, conducted on three levels of the boys' functioning (personality structure, cognitive functions, and overt behavioral measures) indicated significant improvement in the treated group in such areas as socialization and academic achievement. The second evaluation, a series of followup studies conducted 2, 5, 10, and 15 years after treatment indicated that interventions during adolescence produced consistent, profound, and long-lasting changes in these youth. (Author/HLM)

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COMPREHENSIVE VOCATIONALLY ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY: THE PERSPECTIVE AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS*

by

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In 1962, frustrated by the inability of our traditional techniques to reach chronic adolescent delinquents within the community, a colleague and I developed what we called "Comprehensive Vocationally Oriented Psychotherapy." The elements of this treatment program for the chronic antisocial adolescent were:

1. The crisis of leaving school was seen as a unique opportunity for making contact with youth. A boy was contacted within 24 hours after he had either been suspended or had chosen to leave school.

2. Each boy was offered the opportunity to look for a job. Looking for a job was used as an entree for other services such as remedial education and psychotherapy.

3. A major focus of the program was on community outreach. The boys were seen in the community either at their homes, on streetcorners, in coffee houses, or in automobiles.

4. Flexibility of hours and settings were maintained. A therapist was available to talk with the youth over the telephone any time of day or night. Unlike extremely dependent youth who might misuse such an opportunity, when these resistant boys chose to contact the therapist, it was a sign of increasing trust and the building of a relationship.

5. Stress was on mobility, action and reality, but all within the context of psychological understanding. Field trips to explore job opportunities, practice for writing applications, accompanying the boy to a first job interview or to court were all part of the program.

6. Intensive individualized teaching to improve academic skills was developed for each youth (the average reading skill of these high school youth was third grade level). For example, reading programs were devised using menus from local restaurants or the driver's manual. No attempt was made to have the boy returned to school unless he chose to. Instead, alternatives were offered such as night school, on-the-job training or correspondence courses.

7. All parts of the program (job placement, remedial education, and psychotherapy) were administered by one person. It was our belief that providing these areas of intervention by "departments" with separate personnel having different roles, would be counter-productive, and as has been shown in previous studies, might precipitate the boy playing one person against another in ways characteristic of their behavior in the past.

8. The jobs chosen were related to the boys' needs and problems. For example, a boy who had uncontrolled aggression was found a job on a house wrecking crew, a job that he enjoyed very much. The purpose of the job was to establish an arena around which psycho-therapeutic intervention could occur. At no point, however, was the employer to act as a therapist. If the youth did not perform on the job, he could be fired. The only arrangement with employers was that the therapist be notified if the boy's performance was poor so that the experience could be used therapeutically.

9. All aspects of the program were organized and carried out within the context of therapeutic understanding. Each activity was

evaluated in terms of its therapeutic impact on the youth and the goals of the program.

The youth were carefully selected for this program so that they would be a homogenous group of so-called conduct disorders (another approach would be needed for other diagnostic groups). The criteria were: long-standing problems in school adjustment and performance; overt aggression toward peers and authority; a reputation known to school, attendance officers, courts, and the police; suspension or expulsion from school or voluntary dropping out because of poor school performance and antisocial behavior; no grossly observable psychotic behavior, and no previous psychotherapy for the boy or members of his family that lasted for more than one month.

The program was evaluated in two ways: One analysis was done on three levels of the boy's functioning--personality structure, cognitive functions, and overt behavioral measures. There was an experimental group which received comprehensive vocationally oriented psychotherapy and two controls groups: a group of delinquents that did not receive the treatment but were left to the resources of the community, and a group of non-delinquents who were tested over a period of time. The overt behavior was measured by descriptions of legal status, job status, educational status, and other details about family and activities in the community. Cognitive changes were measured by using standard achievement tests in arithmetic fundamentals, arithmetic problems, reading and vocabulary. Personality structure dimensions were evaluated by using a specially devised thematic apperception-type test with stimuli chosen to elicit material

in areas of control of aggression, attitude toward authority, and self-image.

The overall results, using reliable clinical judgments, showed significant improvement in the treated group. Special scales were then devised to analyze various aspects of ego-functioning: The overall results, using reliable clinical judgments, showed significant improvement in the treated group such as guilt, object relations, concept of time and verbalization. Significant changes were found in the successfully treated groups in areas such as increased future time orientation, higher levels of guilt (which correlated with reduced overt antisocial behavior), significant increase in verbalization specifically related to the dimension of control of aggression, and more socially acceptable perceptions of interactions between people (although these perceived interactions were still more active in orientation than passive). The personality changes correlated significantly with improvement in academic areas. Thus, it appeared that as socialization increased, academic learning also increased. A study of the cognitive structures of delinquents and non-delinquents revealed that delinquents were as productive as non-delinquents, but used their cognition in the service of manipulation and control of others, rather than reflection, analysis, and description.

The second evaluation was a series of follow-up studies to determine whether the changes that occurred in the treated group after the 10 months of intensive treatment were maintained. The youth were contacted 2, 5, 10 and 15 years after treatment. All testing was repeated 2 years after treatment, while the other three follow-ups

were telephone interviews. Analysis of the data over the 15 years found that intervention during adolescence with chronic delinquent youth using vocationally oriented psychotherapy produced consistent, profound, and long-lasting changes in these youth into middle life (the youth are now in their 30s).

Comprehensive vocationally oriented psychotherapy may be seen as a possible forerunner of some of the innovative programs for youth of the 1960s. The Job Corps and the Neighborhood Youth Corps were certainly efforts that had similar philosophies. In fact, if one looks carefully at the evaluations of the best of those programs, one can also see some of the remarkable successes they had in helping young people, many of whom were antisocial. The findings of all the programs have shown more and more that a program for chronic delinquent adolescents must be multidimensional. We are also finding more and more that these programs have to have a concrete base in real-life experiences such as in the employment world. More and more we are also realizing that unless there is personality structure change, the behavioral changes can wash out after a short period of time. Yet, little is being done to build on these principles.

There have been few attempts to replicate our program. Some of the attempts at replication have eliminated various portions of the program. Most often, because of the current economic situation, jobs were not included. At other times, when jobs were found, they were either dead-end or makeshift jobs, rather than meaningful work experiences. At other times, the educational part of the program was minimized. Some people in the Department of Labor still maintain that giving a youth a job without building in other services as an

integral part of employment can itself bring about personality and behavioral change. In addition, when funds are cut, counseling is the first service eliminated. When counseling takes place, it is sometimes given to inexperienced and unqualified personnel.

In fact, if we look at what has been going on in the last few years, we can see the return of a punitive simplistic way of dealing with adolescent delinquency. The current "Scared Straight" approach where young people of all sorts are marched into prisons with the gates being dramatically locked, screamed at, and threatened by hard core adult criminals is sweeping the country as the Nation's preventative answer to youth crime. As I see it, there are at least two terrible consequences of this "Scared Straight" approach: One is the naive assumption one can be scared out of criminal activities, something that many of us felt was rejected four decades ago. In fact, the recent data on the Rahway Prison project has shown that the success of the original New Jersey program is certainly not proven. The second consequence of the "Scared Straight" approach is that it perpetuates a grossly inhuman penal system as a legitimate tool to prevent delinquency. No longer need we consider any major change in the criminal justice system. No longer does one need to consider that delinquency is a complex problem with social, as well as personal, roots. No longer does one have to deal with each person individually, carefully planning programs on the basis of individual needs and differential diagnosis. No longer do we have to understand what we are doing. Instead, we seem to be taking steps backwards. As France has become more humane in permitting young people to remain in their community during the week and work off their sentences in institutional settings

on weekends, or has set up restitution programs for adolescent delinquents aimed at getting them to work off their crimes, we are telling the young that they should behave lest they be homosexually raped by adults in prison.

One of the conclusions of our work with comprehensive vocationally oriented psychotherapy has convinced me of the importance of employment in adolescence, not only for the normal adolescent, but as a therapeutic tool for intervention. As long as the overall youth unemployment rate remains at 40%, with 60% unemployment among minority youth, as long as we do not have a diverse and flexible program for youth grounded in reality which can offer opportunities to learn and grow in naturalistic, meaningful settings (and what could be more meaningful to an adolescent than work), we will not be able to adequately deal with adolescent antisocial behavior. It is our feeling that community-based, job-oriented, highly individualized, flexible outreach programs have been shown empirically to be successful in helping these youth. It is our hope that decisions about programming for the youth with a conduct disorder will be made on the basis of data and not on the basis of public relations, politics, or magical fantasies that have failed miserably in the past.